

PRIORITIES FOR THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FIELD

May 2023

Since 2015, Student Experience Research Network (SERN) has had the privilege of engaging with more than 500 researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders who share a commitment to building a just and equitable education system. A core part of SERN's work has always been to listen to our partners, share what we are learning, and work together to identify opportunities to advance understanding and action related to [how practices, policies, and norms shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school](#).

Leading up to and throughout SERN's [strategic sunset](#), we had the opportunity to systematically gather input from our colleagues in the student experience field. This input revealed shifts in needs and resources in the field that in part [shaped SERN's decision to conclude its operations](#) and in doing so, help seed research-focused capacity to continue progress toward an education system that consistently and equitably centers student experience. Our input gathering also revealed forward-looking directions for the field, which we believe are important to share with our partners, to help continue to advance the work we led together.

This document captures a set of forward-looking priorities that were surfaced from nearly 90 conversations, more than 125 survey responses, and other insights from SERN's projects – including a review of more than 50 proposals in response to SERN's latest funding opportunity as part of our sunset. This input came from a diverse group of researchers, practice and policy leaders, and funders. In this memo, along with these field-generated priorities, we share calls to action developed by SERN, which are designed to help advance these priorities immediately and in the future.

The document begins with a brief reflection on the state of the student experience field to frame the priorities and calls to action that follow.

Progress to Date in the Student Experience Field

[Research](#) by The Bridgespan Group has identified five observable characteristics of a field that can be used to understand its state of development and capacity to advance systems-level change. These characteristics include the knowledge base available to conceptualize and address challenges; the actors that contribute to a field's shared identity and work; the field-level vision and agenda, defined as the combination of approaches that actors employ related to the field's focal issue; the infrastructure that enables connection and collaboration among actors; and the financial and non-financial resources supporting the field's actors and infrastructure.

In 2023, SERN partnered with an outside consultant to conduct an impact assessment, which revealed the following shifts in the student experience field since SERN's founding in 2015:

Knowledge base: A larger body of practically relevant, interdisciplinary research is contributing to our understanding of student experience, and key findings from this research have been identified, synthesized into a coherent body of insights, and made accessible to actors outside of academia.

Actors: A broader, more diverse group of scholars have gained recognition for their research and field leadership.

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Field-level vision and agenda: The concept of student experience is “on the map” in that a wider set of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers now see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding it forward.

Infrastructure: There are stronger relationships and growing collaboration in the field, both among researchers and across sectors (e.g., across research and practice), as well as increasing practical application of insights from student experience research.

Resources: Funders are allocating more resources to projects that integrate student experience and related concepts. SERN’s re-granting directed more funding to racially minoritized scholars and early career scholars in the field.

These findings are a testament to the incredible work by actors throughout the field who advanced research on student experience and its use in decision-making in education.

Forward-Looking Considerations

We heard that our partners are eager to maintain and build momentum behind work that supports student experience. In some cases, they expressed a desire to continue or expand work led by SERN, which now must be taken up by others. In other cases, they prioritized new directions for the field. **We offer the priorities and calls to actions in this memo in order to inform and inspire collective action toward these ends in the months and years ahead.**

In some places, we offer information about SERN’s experience and impact, in the hope that it can provide warrant and encouragement for future work. While SERN did work toward many of the priorities in this document, our experience illustrates that no one entity or individual can bear sole responsibility for them. Rather, everyone has

important and necessary roles to play in field-building, and this work must be explicitly and sufficiently resourced long-term to achieve systems change at a large scale.

In sharing this document, we acknowledge a broader context in the United States in which education is highly politicized, and many of the approaches that we know from research are beneficial for students are under attack. We face an urgent need to attend to students’ mental health and well-being and combat the oppressive systems and policies currently harming students who are marginalized along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Individuals, communities, and institutions are grappling with the effects of gun violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, an uncertain economy, and threats to democracy.

We considered which actions felt most relevant and necessary in this context. **We strived to identify not only long-term, resource-intensive visions, but also near-term, lower-lift steps toward those visions. We provide multiple, interconnected entry points for different individuals and organizations and acknowledge that not every call to action will feel relevant to every reader.**

Recognizing that individuals hold roles in multiple sectors, and that the distinctions between sectors can be blurry, we designed the calls to action to be inclusive of research, practice, policy, and funding entities. They place an emphasis on research and research use given the nature of SERN’s work.

Importantly, we recognize that many readers and their colleagues are already committed to acting on these priorities – and some are serving as leaders and models for the field. We are sharing the information we have gathered about energy and needs in the field not to minimize existing efforts, but to contribute to alignment and shared progress toward an education system in which every student’s experience of school sets them up to learn and thrive. In many cases, the impact that the SERN community has already achieved shows that enacting these priorities is possible.

Priorities and Calls to Action

The field-generated priorities that follow are organized according to the five observable characteristics of a field identified in [research](#) by The Bridgespan Group. These characteristics can be used to understand a field's state of development and capacity to advance systems-level change. The subsequent sections include calls to action underneath each priority.

Knowledge Base

1. Expand applied research that enables structural change in education to support student experience
2. Continue to support education actors' access to and meaning-making of research on student experience
3. Create and elevate resources that illustrate real-world implications of research on student experience for advancing structural change in education

Actors

4. Elevate research on student experience by scholars of color and early career scholars and invest in their development and leadership within academia and education
5. Engage more students, families, communities, and policy actors in the field of student experience

Field-level Vision and Agenda

6. Continue elevating student experience to expand the group of influential education leaders, funders, and researchers who see student experience as connected to their work and feel responsible for stewarding it forward
7. Advance agenda-setting and coordinated action on high-impact and high-leverage topics in education connected to student experience

Infrastructure

8. Sustain, deepen, and build new relationships within the student experience field, particularly across silos
9. Continue to create convening spaces that bring actors in the student experience field together across silos to build connections, share and apply knowledge, and develop shared agendas

Resources

10. Change practices that shape how financial resources are distributed, used, and reported on in service of a well-networked, learning-oriented, and diverse student experience field
11. Encourage more public dollars for research on student experience and the mobilization of these research insights in education; rely on philanthropy for a targeted, complementary role

Cross-cutting

12. Advance structural change in academia to support practically relevant, interdisciplinary, equity-centered research and greater bridging between scholars and education actors
13. Expand the types of research evidence used to inform practice and policy in education
14. Enhance the resourcing and impact of field catalysts in order to advance equitable systems change within education

SERN also developed a [memo on student experience in postsecondary education](#) based on interviews with 13 leaders across research, policy, and philanthropy about field-building related to student experience in postsecondary education and how research can help advance structural change within postsecondary institutions to better support student experience. Insights from this work are reflected in the priorities and calls to action in this document, however the postsecondary-focused memo contains additional detail and can serve as a standalone resource for postsecondary education audiences.